

PETER CHARANIS, 1908–1985

With the death of Peter Charanis on March 23, 1985, the American academic community and Dumbarton Oaks, with which he had long been associated, have sustained a grave loss.

Peter Charanis was born on Lemnos in or about 1908. There is some uncertainty about the date, since his birth records were burned, an accident which he always found amusing. In 1920 he immigrated to the United States, coming to New Brunswick, New Jersey, where he spent the rest of his life. He cherished his early memories of his native island, to which he was to return several times in his later years. His sense of history was, in a very fundamental way, born on that island. He was, originally, the subject of a multinational state, the Ottoman Empire, and he immigrated to a state that occasionally calls itself a melting pot. It is legitimate to wonder whether this may have played a role in the development of his profound awareness of the Byzantine Empire as a society of great ethnic diversity and whether it helped to keep him immune from those chauvinistic academic exercises to which Byzantinists are frequently prone.

In his life, as in his career, Peter Charanis was a pioneer. He arrived in the United States a poor immigrant boy; when his life ended he was one of the most respected members of the American academic community. He had retained throughout a disarming honesty, kindness, and an impish humor. He received his schooling in New Brunswick, working at the same time, and went to college at Rutgers University, from which he received his B.A. in 1931. He then went to the University of Wisconsin to study with A. A. Vasiliev. Since Vasiliev had been appointed to teach ancient history, Charanis, too, was admitted as a student in that subject. However, the seminar Vasiliev gave that year was on a Byzantine topic; as Charanis said later, this was not difficult to arrange, since he was the only student in the seminar. It was under Vasiliev's di-

rection that he wrote his Ph.D. dissertation; the topic was the religious policy of the Emperor Anastasius (491–518), about as late a period as could be accommodated within the rubric "ancient history." The thesis was later published as a monograph.

Having completed his Ph.D. (1935), he then went to Brussels to study with another eminent Byzantinist, Henri Grégoire. In Brussels, where he stayed from 1936 to 1938, he participated in Grégoire's seminar, where he met Madeleine Schiltz, a student of both Grégoire and of another great Belgian scholar, Henri Pirenne. She was to become his devoted wife and life companion. In Grégoire's seminar he met Nicholas Adontz and Paul Wittek, with whom he did some work in London. Thus the years in Brussels were formative in a number of ways. According to Charanis himself, he acquired at that time a profound interest in the Armenians, an interest that bore abundant fruit in various studies, for example, "The Armenians in the Byzantine Empire" (*Byzantinoslavica*, 1961) and "A Note on the Ethnic Origin of the Emperor Maurice" (*Byzantion*, 1965). One might surmise that his abiding interest in the various ethnic groups of which the Byzantine Empire was composed became structured as an intellectual quest during this period. In Brussels, too, Charanis formed a strong and long-lasting friendship with Grégoire who eventually came to stay with him when he left Belgium during the war years.

When he returned to the United States, in 1938, he was appointed as Instructor at Rutgers, the university in which he taught until his retirement. At that time Byzantine studies was in its infancy in America. Charanis persuaded the history department to allow him to give a course in ancient history. Eventually this developed into several courses, and soon enough his Byzantine history course was a famous and popular one. He had the profound love of teaching with which good research scholars

are sometimes blessed: he was captivated by his subject and was eager to introduce others to its importance. Fortunately he was also a highly charismatic teacher. His colorful and enthusiastic lectures are still remembered by many former students, who certainly had no idea that there was such a thing as the Byzantine Empire when they went to Rutgers, but who were persuaded of its importance by the time they had left the university. He never lost his enthusiasm for teaching nor his profound belief that it is one of the most essential activities of a scholar. When he was awarded an honorary degree by the University of Thessaloniki in 1972, he said in his address to his Greek colleagues: "You write, as you must, books and learned articles, but you believe also, I think, that your first obligation is towards your students, determined to train not only your successors, but to form educated men and women so that the quality of life which characterizes a truly civilized people and among whose essential ingredients we must include respect for human dignity, freedom of thought and expression, and the cultivation of independent judgment, may be enhanced in your land."

His career at Rutgers University is a witness to this belief in teaching. Along with his undergraduate courses he ran a seminar in Byzantine history, in which he trained a considerable number of specialists in Byzantine studies as well as medievalists in other fields but with an interest in things Byzantine. Because of his dynamism, Rutgers became a center for Byzantine studies; and Rutgers University Press has a Byzantine series, which published such works as George Ostrogorsky's *History of the Byzantine State*, Charles Diehl's *Byzantium: Greatness and Decline*, and John Barker's *Manuel II Palaeologus*. It also published one of the two volumes that appeared in Peter Charanis' honor. Quite appropriately, in 1962 Charanis, by then Voorhees Distinguished Professor, received two separate awards from Rutgers: the Distinguished Research Award and the Lindback Foundation Award for Distinguished Teaching.

Peter Charanis was proud of his contribution to the development of Byzantine studies in the United States, as he had every right to be. His impact was, first of all, the result of his own scholarly work. His research was always on important topics—he never wasted a word on trivia. He never allowed himself to show off his very considerable erudition by pursuing trivialities that have no significance. Instead he wrote on the hotly debated question of the Slavic

impact on the Byzantine Empire. Among his numerous studies on the matter, one might mention "Ethnic Changes in the Byzantine Empire in the Seventh Century" (*Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 1959), "The Chronicle of Monemvasia and the Question of the Slavonic Settlements in Greece" (*Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 1950), and "Nicephorus I, the Savior of Greece from the Slavs (810 A.D.)" (*Byzantina-Metabyzantina*, 1946). The problem of the ethnic composition and the demography of the Byzantine Empire remained a concern of his throughout his life; in later years he paid more attention to the cultural aspects of the question. Equally profound was his interest in social history, which found expression in, among other studies, his long and important article "The Monastic Properties and the State" (*Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 1948). In these works, and in the many others he published, Charanis addressed fundamental questions with a sharp eye, a keen intelligence, a profound erudition, and that quality that so rarely goes with the others, an unflinching common sense. Along with his respect for historical truth, he had a great love for his subject, and that gave him an empathy for and a very real understanding of the society he was studying. In his scholarly work Charanis was a pioneer. Especially important is his contribution to social history, which he, along with Ostrogorsky and others, developed into a field in which Byzantinists have since done some of their most important work. What he brought to it was a concern with historical realities: he was interested in how people lived, what affected their lives, what groups, ideas, and actions shaped social realities.

It was also through his students that he exercised an important influence on Byzantine studies. During his academic lifetime Byzantine studies became incorporated into American university curricula and flourished. Charanis had a great deal to do with this development. Not only did he train several Byzantinists, he also taught, not formally but nevertheless substantively, many other people with whom he came into contact. His kindness, accessibility, and respect for scholarship made him a mentor for scholars of a younger generation who found in him a critic with the ability to see both the flaws and the merits of a piece of work, and to provide encouragement. It is typical of this aspect of his personality that in his last stay at Dumbarton Oaks as a Visiting Scholar, in 1978–79, he became involved in the work of the junior fellows and dedicated one of his articles to them.

His connection with Dumbarton Oaks is yet an-

other way in which he contributed to Byzantine studies. It began in 1944, when he lived at Dumbarton Oaks for two years as a fellow. He returned as a Visiting Scholar twice, the first time in 1956–57, and remained involved in the institution until the time of his death. He served on the Board of Scholars from 1960 to 1975, and after 1975 he was an honorary associate. He organized a symposium on Byzantine Society in 1969. He was a frequent visitor and attended most of the Symposia, where his comments were always illuminating and often provocative. To Dumbarton Oaks he gave his enthusiastic support and advice, for he saw how much the future of Byzantine studies depended on it.

Formal recognition of Peter Charanis' services to scholarship is evident in the many honors of which he was the recipient. He was given two honorary degrees, one from the University of Thessaloniki and one from his own university, Rutgers. He was decorated by the Greek government with the Royal Order of the Phoenix. He was a corresponding

member of the Academy of Athens and belonged to a number of learned societies.

In a prominent place in Peter Charanis' study the visitor saw a motto: "J'aime l'histoire, parce que j'aime la vie." It is a statement of Henri Pirenne's, which Charanis made his own, and it encapsulates his personality. Never an antiquarian, always a historian, he loved history, he loved life, he loved people, and did so intensely. That is why his mark on both scholarship and on his friends and colleagues is so strong. His memory will live on, through his work, his students, and through the inspiration he gave to so many colleagues in the United States and in the international community of Byzantinists. To his wife and children, whose loss is the most intense, we extend our deepest sympathy.

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